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THE BATTLE OF AACHEN: AN ANALYSIS OF
CITY FIGHTING TACTICS (RESEARCH).

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THE BATTLE OF AACHEN: AN ANALYSIS OF CITY FIGHTING TACTICS (RESEARCH).

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview. Probable birthplace of the emperor Charlemagne, the ancient imperial city of Aachen, Germany, had been regarded with reverence for centuries. At least 32 German kings and emperors had been crowned in its famous cathedral. To Germans of the World War II era, the city represented a heritage precious to National Socialist ideology. (5:280) From 26 August to 14 September 1944, Allied forces conducted a pursuit across Europe from the Seine River in France to the western border of Germany. (3:56) (Appendix A) Along this border was the Siegfried Line, a system of interlocking pillboxes, minefields, and antitank obstacles that stretched from Holland to Switzerland. Located near the intersection of the Dutch, Belgian, and German borders, Aachen lay between two bands of this defensive wall, guarding a broad plain that led eastward to Cologne and the Rhine River. In October the city was encircled by two divisions of the First US Army. Severe house-to-house fighting preceded Aachen's surrender on 21 October. (7:16-18)

B. Scope. This monograph will be restricted to First Army planning and execution of the attack of Aachen during the period 12 September to 21 October 1944.

C. Objective. The Battle of Aachen will be analyzed to determine the success or failure of the tactics and techniques employed by the attacking units.

D. Method of Development. The study will be conducted in the chronological order of events.

II. BODY

A. The Initial Plan. The Allied pursuit to the Siegfried Line set the stage for a lull in First Army offensive operations. Wide troop dispersion and logistical problems plagued most units. Commanders felt it necessary to reorganize and concentrate combat power at critical points along the Siegfried Line in preparation for an advance to the Rhine River. The First Army commander felt that isolation of Aachen was a prerequisite for such an advance. The city's roads were not essential to support the advance, and its railroads had been demolished by air attacks. Aachen was, however, heavily fortified and guarded a natural approach to Cologne and the Rhine River. Moreover, it was a symbol of Nazi faith. (5:251-252, 280-281) The initial plan was to encircle and bypass the city, leaving behind enough troops to force eventual capitulation. (7:31)

B. Isolation. (Appendix B) The scheme of maneuver called for a 30th Division attack in the north, a 1st Division attack in the south, and a linkup of the two divisions in the vicinity of Wurselen. (5:252-253) The 1st Infantry Division pushed into Germany southwest of Aachen on 12 September. (2:3) In spite of the offensive lull, limited-objective attacks were conducted. By 7 October the division had progressed northward past Eilendorf. North of Aachen, the 30th Division reached the German border on 18 September but would not attack for 2 weeks. (5:260-282) On 2 October the division launched a massive attack east across the Wurm River in the vicinity of Rimsburg. Turning south, attacking elements reached Uebach on 4 October and the high ground southeast of Alsdorf on 7 October. The following day heavy resistance was encountered north of Wurselen. (5:274-297) Bad weather resulted in critical shortages of ammunition, fuel, and food for both American divisions. The weather also grounded Allied aircraft, and the Germans were able to bring in food, munitions, and reinforcements. (7:85) 1st Division elements attacked on 8 October, taking Verlautenheide, Crucifix Hill (Hill 239), and Ravels Hill (Hill 231) by 9 October. On 10 October the Aachen suburb of Haaren was taken, cutting one of the two remaining supply routes. Less than 2 miles separated the two forces, but a counterattack by the 116th Panzer Division and the 3d Panzer Grenadier Division delayed the closing of the gap until 1615 on 16 October. Poor weather, logistical problems, and a fierce German counterattack made the isolation of Aachen extremely difficult and costly. (5:284-309)

C. Reduction. (Appendix C) The bypass plan was now considered impractical. The Allied offensive lull had allowed the Germans to reinforce the Siegfried defenses, and encirclement proved to be more difficult than expected. American lines were dangerously overextended, and mere containment of the city required the equivalent of a division of troops. Additionally, indications were that German propaganda was attempting to make Aachen a national rallying point. (5:285) The First Army commander decided to reduce the city immediately, and the mission was given to the 1st Infantry Division. (5:307)

The city was defended by the 246th Division, commanded by COL Gerhardt Wilck. The enemy force consisted of roughly 5,000 men, five tanks, nineteen 105-millimeter (mm) howitzers, eight 75-mm pieces, and six 150-mm guns. On 10 October a First Army courier delivered an ultimatum to the German commander. Public address systems blared the message to German soldiers and civilians. (6:5) They would have 24 hours to surrender, or American artillery and air-strikes would bomb them into submission. Colonel Wilck chose not to reply. The ultimatum expired at 1200 on 11 October, and a massive air and artillery bombardment followed. (7:113-124)

Forces for the reduction were limited. Because most of its units were disposed on the elongated front east of the city, the 1st Division had only two infantry battalions, the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 26th Infantry Regiment, available for the operation. (5:295-311) Because the gap east of Aachen was open, the 26th Infantry Commander was ordered not to get inextricably engaged in the city. (5:305-309) The two battalions had to assume such a wide attack frontage that all companies were committed. Any reserve would have to come from the division reserve battalion, and the incomplete encirclement had priority. (2:7)

Planning for the coordinated attack of the fortified city began as early as 2 October. (6:26) A methodical reduction was envisioned in which every building would be cleared. Attackers were warned to overlook nothing; every building was to be considered an enemy stronghold until proven otherwise. (5:309-311) Attached to each rifle company were three tanks or tank destroyers, two 57-mm antitank guns, one flamethrower, and two additional bazooka teams. (2:7) Companies were assigned zones of action with one platoon-sized assault team normally assigned to a street. Each team had one tank or tank destroyer and one heavy machinegun. (5:309-312) Checkpoints and contact points were designated at prominent buildings and street intersections. No advances were to be made beyond these points without proper coordination with adjacent units. Light artillery and mortar fire was to be employed in close support to isolate the area under immediate attack. Targets were preplanned on suspect enemy locations and prominent terrain features. (2:5-7) A total of 26 artillery battalions participated. (5:253) Approximately 15,000 of the city's prewar population of 165,000 remained. (6:1) Anticipating that civilians would be a problem, the planners established procedures for evacuating all persons including German soldiers, male civilians, women, and children. It would be a slow, tedious process, but a potential behind-the-lines enemy threat would be minimized. Centralized battalion ammunition dumps were to be moved behind the advancing attackers to facilitate large expenditures of ammunition. (2:6)

Allied efforts to gather intelligence proved rewarding. Maps of the city were procured and distributed to the attacking battalions as early as 6 October. Regular patrolling proved valuable in the formulation of attack objectives. Patrols penetrated deep into the city as early as 4 October, establishing that enemy strongpoints existed at Observatory Hill, Salvatorsberg, and the Lousberg Hills. Antitank positions, observation posts, machinegun positions, and minefields were located in the southern portion of the city. Prisoners taken by patrols reported that enemy morale was low but that reinforcements flowed steadily through the gap northeast of Aachen. (6:3-4)

During the Allied air and artillery bombardment on 12 October, the 3d Battalion took the high ground northeast of Rothe-Erde and established a foothold in the factory district east of the city proper. Most of this objective had been cleared by the evening of 12 October. On the morning of 13 October, two companies of the 2d Battalion conducted simultaneous assaults over a steep railroad embankment and established a foothold in the southeastern part of the city. The battalion was able to get its attached platoon of tanks, platoon of tank destroyers, and platoon of antitank guns across the low, exposed swampy ground and over the embankment before the Germans could react with their tanks. (2:9-10) The 1106th Engineers conducted feints toward the southern outskirts of the city. (1:10) Achievement of surprise was crucial to the successful establishment of the foothold. The German commander later stated that he expected the main attack to come from the south. By the time he realized it had come from the east, it was too late to reposition his forces. (2:17-18) The 2d Battalion attack continued without pause after the foothold was established. By the evening of 13 October, the 2d Battalion was well into its first objective, the cemetery, and the 3d Battalion had reached the base of its first objective, Observatory Hill. (6:7-8)

During the first day of city fighting, the infantry quickly learned that the street was the worst place to be. Fields of fire were restricted to streets and alleys, but the heavy masonry and stone buildings provided good cover and concealment. Avoiding the withering fire of the streets, they blasted holes in walls in order to move house to house. Large quantities of explosives were required to support this activity. (2:11) Exposure of tanks and antitank weapons also posed a problem. Forced to use the streets, they adopted a technique of using cleared side streets, nosing around corners for short periods to support the advancing infantry, and moving rapidly to newly cleared side streets. (2:6-7) When elements of the 3d Battalion discovered that some apartment houses and air raid shelters were relatively unaffected by tank and antitank gun fire, they brought forward a self-propelled, 155-mm gun. When one round practically leveled one of the buildings, the regimental commander sent one of the guns to support the 2d Battalion as well. (6:7-8) Rubble and damaged buildings were obstacles to movement and had to be cleared. Engineers worked constantly removing obstacles, mines, and booby-traps. (1:29) Glass and other litter punctured tires and forced medics to use tracked cargo carriers to evacuate wounded. (5:310-311)

On 14 October the attack resumed with artillery supporting from positions south of Aachen. The clearing forces found that the positioning of this supporting artillery was important. With the guns located to their left and the gun-target line parallel to their front, they could drop shells into the same block in which they were working without danger from short rounds. Delay fuses allowed shells to penetrate one or more floors before exploding. Defenders exited the strongholds rapidly under this fire, subjecting themselves to well-aimed small arms and automatic weapons fire as they fled. (2:11)

Failure of the two clearing battalions to establish contact on the ground caused a delay that would not be rectified until the following morning. Arriving at a predesignated point of contact with the 3d Battalion, elements of the 2d Battalion were unable to proceed because the defenders were trying to get around their right flank. Half of a company was required to prevent this penetration. During the night the 3d Battalion commander found that elements of his southernmost company had been waiting patiently several hundred meters north of the designated juncture point. (2:11)

On the afternoon of 15 October, a counterattack was launched against the southernmost company of the 2d Battalion. The attack penetrated approximately two blocks, but after 2 hours of fighting, it was sealed and the line restored. (2:11-13) During the period 14-15 October, the Germans used the gap east of the city to reinforce with a convoy of eight assault guns and one infantry battalion. (5:312-313) Late in the afternoon of 15 October, the German garrison employed these troops in a battalion-sized counterattack against two companies of the 3d Battalion. Supported by mortar fire and tanks, the Germans pushed the Americans back from Observatory Hill. Close hand-to-hand fighting ensued, but by 1700 the 3d Battalion commander reported that his battalion had stopped the German effort and could resume the advance on Observatory Hill. (6:8-9) Preplanned artillery fires were instrumental in repelling these counterattacks. (1:30)

The commitment of the two German Panzer Divisions against the encircling forces east of the city, however, temporarily halted the clearing effort. Both battalions were ordered to cease offensive operations and to be prepared to defend to their rear. Both were given on-order missions to reinforce the units east of the city. (1:27) The German attack was stopped and the gap successfully closed late on 16 October, but the offensive within the city was delayed until 18 October. During this time the extended left and right flanks of the 26th Infantry were reinforced. On 17 October the 1106th Engineer Combat Group which had been blocking the southern approaches to the city moved a battalion northward to make contact with the 2d Battalion, [REDACTED]. Additionally, the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, 28th Division, was attached to the 1st Division and employed in a flank security role to cover the growing gap between the engineers and the 2d Battalion, ^{26th Infantry.} In the north Task Force Hogan joined the attack along the right flank of the 3d Battalion. Composed of two battalions of mixed armor and mechanized infantry from the 3d Armored Division, the task force was given the mission of assisting in the capture of the Lousberg Heights and cutting the Aachen-Laurensburg highway. This reinforcement gave the Americans a force roughly equal in size to that of the defenders. (5:314-315)

Offensive activities resumed on the morning of 18 October with the clearing forces continuing to learn as the attack progressed. When machinegun fire and threats failed to elicit response from

defenders in one large pillbox, a jet of flame from a flamethrower quickly resulted in the surrender of over 200 German soldiers and approximately 1,000 civilians. (2:13) The mere threat of flame employment brought surrender on later occasions. (6:8) Several bitter experiences in which Germans were bypassed in cellars and other hiding places reminded the attackers of the necessity to search thoroughly. (5:311) That same morning one company was delayed over 2 hours while they searched for a source of small arms fire behind their lines. The source was finally located in a church steeple upon which tank and tank destroyer fire was ineffective. The 155-mm gun was used to eliminate the steeple, which proved to be an observation post made of heavy concrete. (2:15-16) The 2d as well as the 3d Battalion found the 155-mm gun to be very effective, but limited quantities of ammunition restricted its use to difficult situations. (1:25) The 2d Battalion also experienced a problem when the Germans used city sewage tunnels to move patrols behind the American lines. It was necessary to locate every manhole and block the underground passageways to prevent this infiltration. (1:24)

In the north the 3d Battalion reduced the remaining resistance on Observatory Hill, capturing the Hotel Quellendorf, a large food and ammunition cache, and a 20-mm antiaircraft gun. On 19 October the battalion seized the Salvatorberg objective against token resistance. At the same time Task Force Hogan was beginning to overrun the poorly defended Lousberg Heights. (5:315) In the south the 2d Battalion had advanced past the cathedral. (2:16)

Despite American gains, the Aachen commander was ordered to hold the city to the last man and "if necessary, allow himself to be buried under its ruins." (5:314) On 19 October, however, the higher German commanders pulled the counterattacking divisions out of the encirclement area and abandoned the defenders to their fate. Colonel Wilck issued an order demanding a fight to the last man and the last bullet, but the order did little to delay the end of the rapidly crumbling resistance. American units seized the main railroad station and subdued a final strongpoint near the Technical University in the northwestern corner of Aachen. On 20 October they reached the railroad tracks in the western portion of the city. (5:314-316)

On the morning of 21 October, members of the 3d Battalion brought their 155-mm gun forward to attack a large air raid bunker. The bunker proved to be the headquarters of the German defense, and the German commander was eager to surrender before the gun was employed. Resistance ended at 1205 on 21 October. A total of 11,627 German prisoners were taken, 3,473 within the city. American casualties numbered approximately 6,000; 498 of these were incurred by the two battalions of the 26th Infantry. Of the 498, 75 were killed, and nine were missing. (5:316-318)

III. ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A. The Decision to Encircle. The decision to isolate the city at the outset gave the First Army a great deal of flexibility. Once this operation was complete, the attackers could bypass or reduce the city at their option. If encirclement had been accomplished with a minimum of effort, the fortified city might well have been bypassed and the drive to the Rhine River started. When heavy resistance to the encircling elements forced abandonment of the bypass plan, the restriction of German reinforcement capability still gave the attackers the advantage. Encirclement also gave the attackers the ability to accomplish tactical surprise in gaining a foothold for the reduction. The defenders expected an attack from the south and could not reposition for the attack from the east. In spite of the fact that encirclement was incomplete when the reduction began, the attackers could have entered the city from almost any direction.

B. The Decision to Reduce. The decision to reduce rather than bypass the city may appear controversial when the possibility of surrender without the tedious street fighting is considered. The Allies could not use the damaged railroads, and highway supply routes could be established elsewhere. The crucial factors, however, were that weather, logistical problems, and strong German resistance made encirclement much more difficult than expected and that large numbers of troops were required to maintain the resulting extended frontage. An entire division was simply too great an asset to tie down in a siege-type operation. In view of the order from the German high command to defend Aachen to the last man, the possibility of surrender without a fight was even more remote. A long, unsuccessful attempt to gain this surrender using passive measures might indeed have given the propaganda makers fuel for establishment of a national rallying point. Although the reduction was costly in terms of time and resources, it was the best course of action under the circumstances.

C. Timing of the Reduction. The reduction of Aachen began on the morning of 13 October, 3 days before the encirclement of the city was completed. Although the gap was small, the Germans were able to reinforce the defenders with a battalion of infantry and supporting artillery as late as 15 October. When commitment of two German Panzer Divisions threatened the overextended lines of the encirclement, it became necessary to give the 26th Infantry a be-prepared mission to defend, an on-order mission to reinforce, and an order to cease offensive operations for almost 48 hours. The German attack which caused the delay in closing the gap admittedly could not have been foreseen. In hindsight, however, the physical and psychological advantage gained by reducing after the gap was closed would have been significant. The defenders might have surrendered more quickly, and the attackers would have had fewer delays and German

reinforcements to contend with. After a reorganization and consolidation on encirclement objectives, the 1st Division would probably have been able to give the 26th Infantry a reserve within the city.

D. Failure to Use a Reserve. Although the 1st Infantry Division had a reserve battalion, the criticality of the situation east of the city precluded its use by the 26th Infantry. Companies were assigned such wide zones of action that there simply were no troops left for a reserve force within the city. Situations continually arose in which the employment of the reserve would have prevented delays in the reduction. When hidden defenders appeared behind friendly lines, the reserve elements could have dealt with the threat. When contact between the two battalions was lost, the reserve could have restored it. Reserves might also have been committed to assist in stopping counterattack penetrations. It is conceivable that had reserves been available for flank security that at least part of the reinforcement of the reduction would not have been necessary.

E. Organization for Combat. The 26th Infantry's attacking elements were tailored for the situation. Platoon-sized assault teams cleared their assigned streets effectively. Attachment of tanks and antitank weapons as low as company and platoon level proved to be essential. Flamethrower and bazooka teams were also effective. Problems encountered with rubble in the streets could have been solved by attaching engineer elements at company or platoon level, but the overall organization for combat must be considered an asset.

F. Clearing Techniques. The units conducting the reduction of Aachen were able to foresee and plan for most of the city fighting problems; others became apparent as the attack progressed. They realized in the beginning that because the city was large and heavily fortified, that a methodical, house-to-house reduction was appropriate. As a result of the emphasis placed on thorough clearing, there were few instances of enemy resistance behind lines. German use of sewage tunnels was apparently unexpected, but the problem was quickly solved by locating and blocking the tunnels. The attackers foresaw the requirement for increased firepower and large expenditures of ammunition. Accordingly, firepower at company and platoon level was supplemented, and consolidated ammunition dumps were moved forward as the attackers moved. Control problems were anticipated, and a series of checkpoints and contact points established at easily identifiable locations. Wide zones of action were undesirable but unavoidable because of commitments east of the city. The attackers quickly learned that both men and tanks should avoid the streets whenever possible. The use of effective clearing techniques gave the Americans a definite advantage.

G. Fire Support. Liberal use of fire support gave the attackers a great advantage. The massive air and artillery bombardment preceding the attack significantly reduced both the German ability and desire to resist. Close support batteries were positioned so that short rounds were not a threat. Fires were employed so close to friendly troops that coordination of artillery with small arms and automatic weapon fire was possible. Delay fuses allowed rounds to penetrate buildings before exploding. Self-propelled artillery was used in the direct fire role with much success. In spite of an ammunition shortage, 155-mm guns were employed against pillboxes which were unaffected by tank and antitank weapon fire.

H. Intelligence. The intelligence gathering effort was begun early and exploited fully. Weapons locations, fortified positions, observation posts, obstacles, and strongpoints were located and the information incorporated into the scheme of maneuver. The 3d Battalion objectives of Observatory Hill, Salvatorsberg, and the Lousberg Heights would have been relatively unknown quantities in the absence of intelligence from patrols. Maps of the city were distributed early, thus giving the attackers the advantage of knowing the location of key buildings and streets. The factor of defender familiarity with the city was minimized.

IV. EFFECTS AND IMPLICATIONS

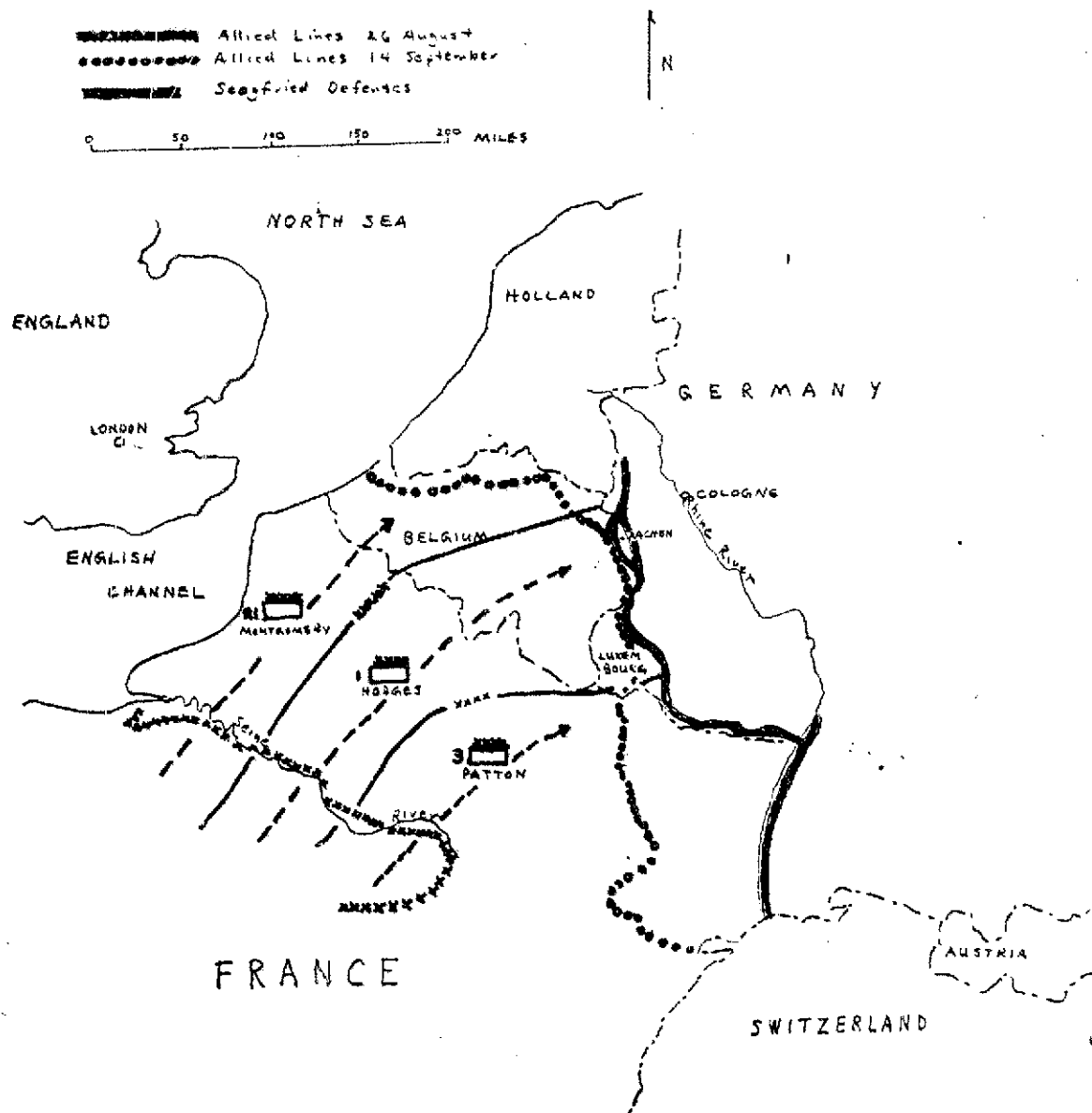
The First US Army's tactics and techniques in the elimination of Aachen as an obstacle to the advance across western Europe must be considered appropriate and successful. The attackers encircled the city, giving themselves the option of reducing or bypassing. When stubborn German resistance made the bypass alternative untenable, the Americans achieved tactical surprise in the conduct of an efficient reduction. Organization for combat was appropriate, and effective clearing techniques were employed. Fire support was applied liberally, and intelligence efforts minimized the German advantages. Weak points in the tactical plan were in the timing of the reduction and the failure to properly employ a reserve.

City fighting has historically been a costly and time-consuming venture. The American approach to the capture of Aachen kept these undesirable characteristics to a minimum.

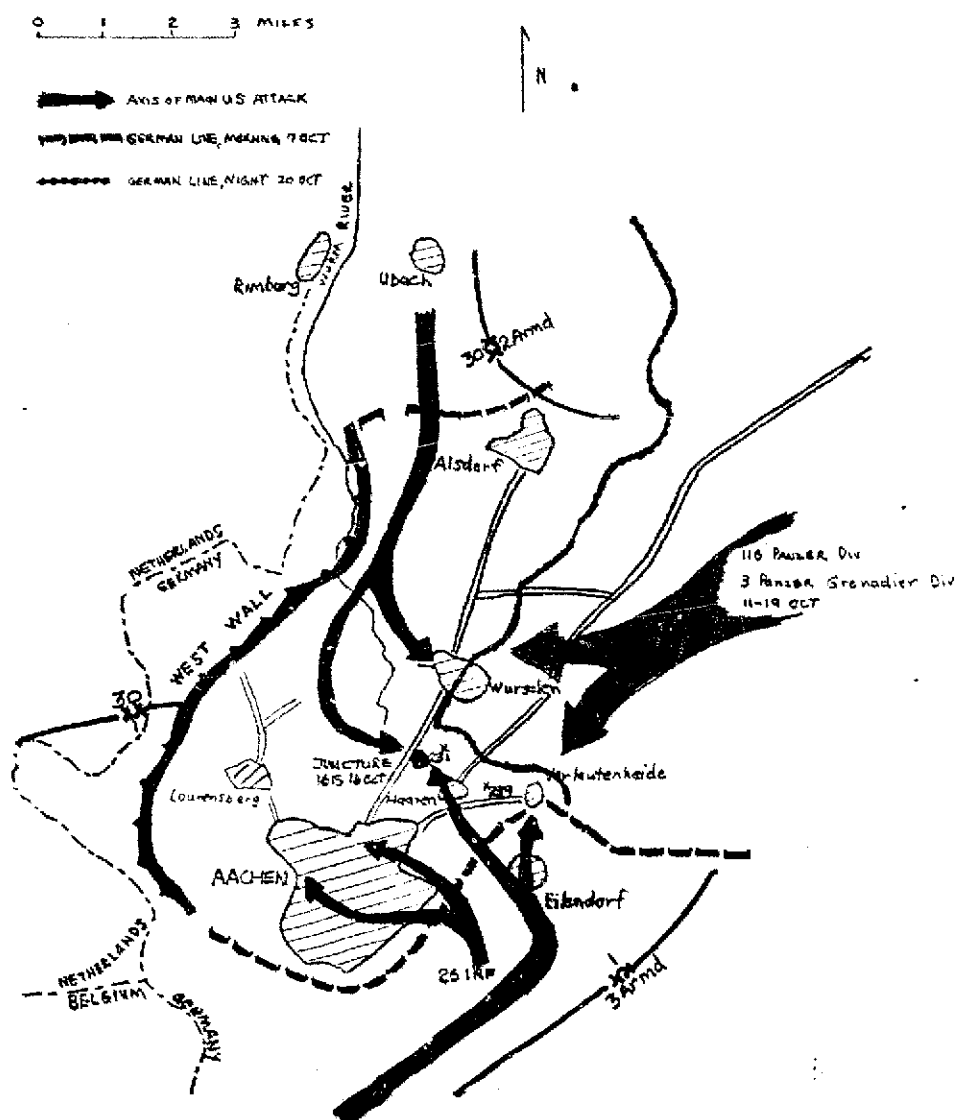


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APPENDIX A--Map "A," Allied Advance to the Siegfried Line



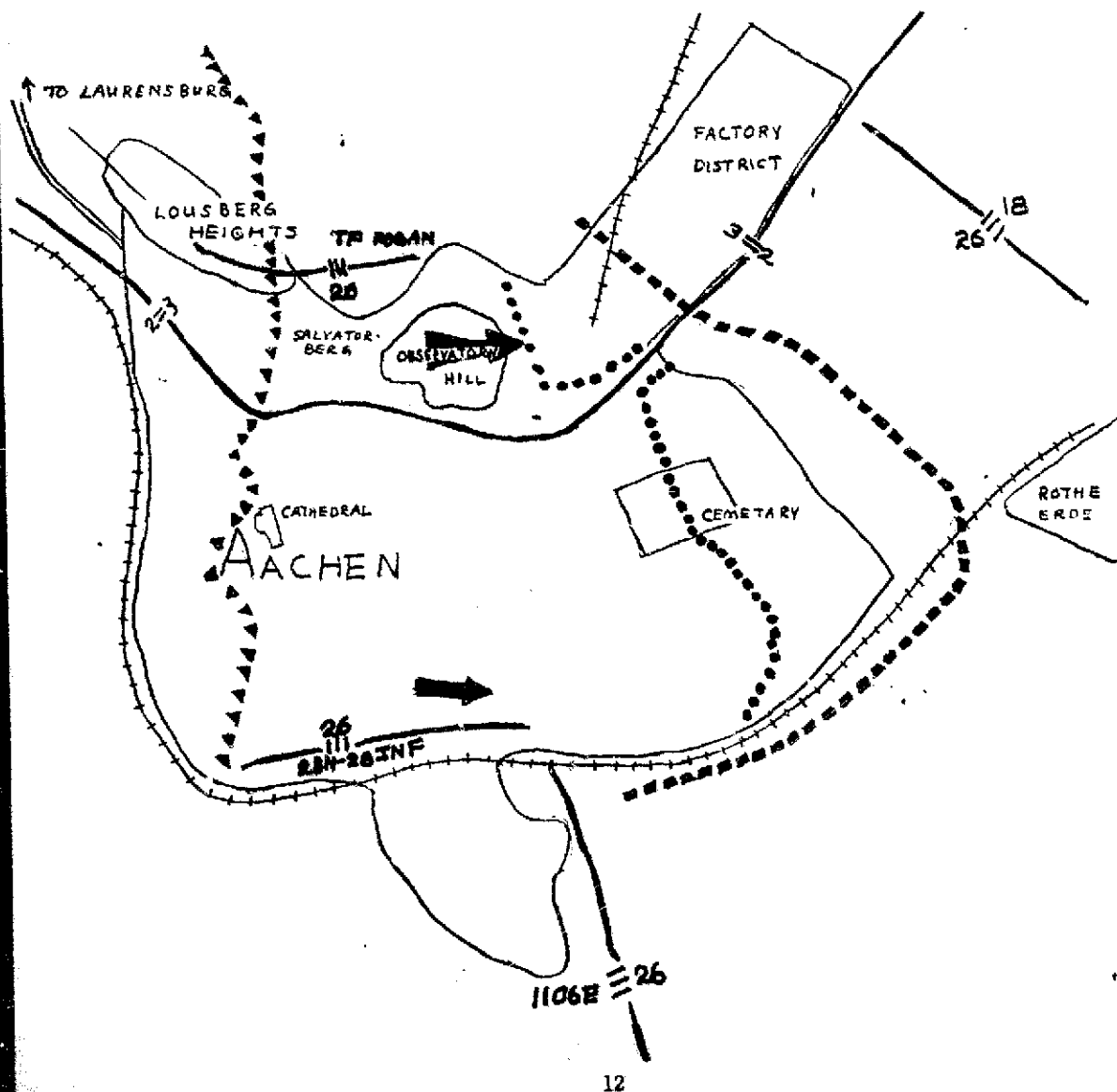
APPENDIX B--Map "B," Encirclement of Aachen



APPENDIX C--Map "C," Reduction of Aachen

- AMERICAN POSITION 12 OCTOBER
- AMERICAN POSITION 13 OCTOBER
- ▲▲▲▲▲ AMERICAN POSITION 19 OCTOBER
- ➔ GERMAN COUNTERATTACKS 15 OCTOBER

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UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL
Leadership Department
Management Committee
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ATSIN-L

5 July 72

MEMORANDUM FOR: DIRECTOR, LEADERSHIP DEPARTMENT

SUBJECT: Classified Information

1. This memo has been read and signed by the content evaluator, a person with expertise in the subject area.
2. To the best of my knowledge, this monograph/staff study (Roster Number 115 ADV 4-72) contains no classified information, and in the opinion of the undersigned requires no classification IAW AR 380-5.

Joe S. Johnson, Jr.
(NAME)
Instructor
(TITLE)

B80D
(DEPT)